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FM AMCONSUL ISTANBUL

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INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

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C O N F I D E N T I A L ISTANBUL 001313

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TAGS: PREL PTER RS TU

SUBJECT: CHECHEN "BIG HERO" MOURNED IN ISTANBUL

Classified By: Consul General Deborah K. Jones for reasons
1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Approximately 4,000 mourners congregated at the Fatih mosque in Istanbul on 14 July for an "in-absentia" funeral in honor of Chechen rebel leader, Shamil Basayev. Aside from raucous anti-Russia, anti-U.S. and anti-Israel chanting, the event proceeded in a relatively benign and orderly manner. The funeral, co-sponsored by a charity suspected by some of international terrorism financing, drew nearly three times as many mourners as the Istanbul-based funeral held in honor of Basayev's fallen colleague, Aslan Maskhadov, in March 2005, possibly reflecting an increase the number of in Chechen sympathizers in Istanbul. End summary.

¶2. (U) Prompted by a full-page invitation in Yeni Safak, Turkey's principal Islamic-leaning daily, to the in absentia funeral of "the big hero of the Chechen resistance," we attended a memorial service for fallen Chechen rebel leader, Shamil Basayev at the Fatih mosque in Istanbul. The event, organized by the Chechen Solidarity Association, drew a crowd of approximately 4,000 men, women and children, following regularly-scheduled Friday prayers and four genuine funerals.

Aside from a few fence-jumpers, worshipers generally congregated calmly while police patted down individuals as they entered the mosque's courtyard.

¶3. (C) As the real funerals drew to a close, 350-400 men (most appearing to be in their early 20's), began the Basayev tribute by leading the crowd in a series of chants including "God is Great" and "There is no God but Allah." Bulent Yildirim, the president of one of the event's sponsoring organizations, the Foundation for Human Rights, Liberties and Humanitarian Relief (IHH), detailed atrocities (presumably conducted against Chechens) and told the audience that they were not just here to shed tears but that they "would go and do what needs to be done." (Note: In 1997 local officers at IHH's Istanbul headquarters were arrested after a raid by security forces uncovered firearms, explosives and bomb-making instructions. End note.)

¶4. (U) Mourners continued chanting Arabic slogans interspersed with the following phrases in Turkish: "Killer Russians--out of Chechnya," "Killer Israelis--Out of Palestine," "Killer Americans--Out of the Middle East," "Shamil Basayev--Your way is our way," and "Hamas--Go on Resisting." As a possible reference to the upcoming election season, Yildirim also had a message for the Turkish Government, "Don't support these infidels--if you go straight, we're ready to follow you." Mid-way through the ceremony, participants burned a flag--which we could not see--to the crowd's great delight. As for Basayev, Yildirim praised the fact that he didn't compromise, claiming that he aimed for independence and died for God and the cause. Despite the core group's efforts to maintain the rally beyond the allocated 45 minutes, the crowd dispersed fairly readily

on schedule with the final "amin."

¶ 15. (U) Turkish press reported that in absentia funerals for Basayev were held in major cities throughout Turkey, including Ankara, Izmir and Antalya among others. The largest protest, organized by the Saadet (Felicity) party, reportedly drew over 40,000 mourners in Diyarbakir. Similar events were held in March 2005 after the death of Chechen rebel leader, Aslan Maskhadov, whose Istanbul-based funeral attracted 1500 mourners.

¶ 16. (C) Comment: Turkey, and Istanbul in particular, has a long and complicated history with Chechnya. Though many Turks trace their ancestral roots to the Caucasus, the crowd which gathered for this event had no apparent shared ethnic affiliation -- only a few individuals were carrying Chechen flags. Notably, neither Russia nor Turkey officially recognize as terrorists the other's principal perceived domestic threats. In 1996 a group of pro-Chechen gunmen hi-jacked a ferry going from Trabzon to Russia across the Black Sea. The hijackers were arrested and imprisoned but later escaped amid Russian suspicions that they were set free. Later, in April 2001, the Swiss Hotel in Istanbul was taken hostage by gunmen, including the leader of the 1996 incident. In both cases, the hostage takers were charged with "hijacking" and "limiting personal liberty" as opposed to terrorism-related charges which would have carried a much harsher penalty. The Russian government for its part, left the PKK off of its official list of terrorist organizations -- publicly released for the first time on July 18 -- a point which was not lost on the Turkish press. End comment.

JONES